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ABSTRACT

This case study examined the influences of autonomy and uncertain expectations of accountability on the functioning of an urban charter school during its initial years of development. The school studied was a charter school in its second year of development that was attempting to measure student improvement in challenging areas such as social adjustment and interpersonal behaviors while working with a challenging population of at-risk high school students. Data were collected from a variety of sources, including interviews with the school's staff of four teachers, a counselor, a classroom assistant, and the school director. Documents generated by and about the school were also studied. Findings show that while requiring schools to administer assessments for purposes of documenting accountability is a worthy goal, the usefulness and appropriateness of such efforts are contingent on knowledgeable decision making. There were a number of problems in the start-up of this school, and findings show that it will be increasingly important to reexamine the notion of charter school autonomy so that the freedom to be creative and innovative does not collide with the need to be responsible and accountable. (SLD)

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# Issues of Accountability: A Case Study of a Charter School Under Development

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# Issues of Accountability: A Case Study of a Charter School Under Development

In recent years, politicians and educators alike have heavily debated the issues of educational reform, resulting in increased calls for educational accountability and evidence of educational effectiveness in our nation's public schools. One arena in which educational accountability and evidence of effectiveness is of great concern is in the development of charter schools.

Approximately 250,000 students in the United States are currently enrolled in charter schools (RPP International, 2000). Originally heralded as vehicles for educational reform and envisioned as incentives with which to improve public education, over 1,400 charter schools currently operate throughout the nation. In essence, charter schools represent an experimental effort addressing the question of whether or not schools can succeed, if guided by a specific vision of education and if afforded a degree of autonomy and freedom from regulation with which to enact that vision. Part of that experimental effort includes holding charter schools accountable for demonstrating that they are achieving the outcomes of their specified vision (Dorn, 1998).

Theoretically, charter school operators agree to allow their state's charter school regulatory agency to hold them to an increased level of accountability in exchange for the opportunity to operate their charter schools with an increased degree of autonomy or freedom from regulation. However, there is some indication that for some charter schools the theoretical agreement (stated above), between themselves and their respective regulatory agencies, is not always well defined nor clearly adhered to (Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001). In particular, unclear standards of accountability may be problematic

for some charter schools - if the performance standards to which they assume they are being held are not the same as those of the regulatory agency overseeing their operation as a charter school. In addition, preliminary findings suggest that when regulating agencies provide charter schools with increased autonomy (without also providing important forms of support and assistance), they may actually be hindering the ability of those schools to develop successfully and operate well (Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001).

These findings raise some important questions. First, is increased autonomy (e.g. independence and freedom from regulation) always a desirable quality for developing charter schools? What are the ramifications for charter schools when regulatory agencies are unclear about the standards to which they purport to hold charter schools accountable? Finally, have the necessary and sufficient conditions for successfully creating and sustaining charter schools yet been fully identified?

## Purpose

In the following case study, I examine the influences of autonomy and uncertain expectations of accountability on the functioning of an urban charter school during its initial years of development. In particular, I examine from an insider's perspective the effects of autonomy and uncertain accountability on the processes of creating a learning environment for students and a working environment for staff during the start-up years of an urban charter school for high-risk youth.

## Method

The charter school selected for this case study was a desirable one for me for a number of reasons. First, it was a school to which I already had access and a staff that was willing to participate in this study. More importantly, though, it was a charter school

in its second year of development that was attempting to measure student improvement in challenging areas such as social adjustment and interpersonal behaviors and with a challenging population of at-risk high school students. It also was a small program (e.g. with an enrollment of between 40 and 60 students) that provided for me an opportunity to get to know well its staff and daily activities.

This study was conducted over a period of a year and a half during which time data was collected from a variety of sources (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Merriam, 1998; and Stake, 1995). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each member of the school's staff (e.g. four certified teachers, a school counselor, a classroom assistant, and the school's director); selected classes and school activities were observed; field notes were collected; and relevant documents generated by the charter school were examined (e.g. the charter school's original charter contract; its evaluation plan; and the charter school's annual progress reports, which it submits to its sponsoring agency and the state department of education). Member checks were also conducted with each interviewed staff member.

Data was analyzed using a combination of methods described by Stake (1995) that included direct interpretation as well as aggregating instances of a phenomena (e.g. categorical aggregation); looking for corroborating instances as well as disconfirming instances; and searching for consistency within certain conditions (e.g. patterns and correspondence).

## Success for All Academy[1]

[1] names have been changed

Success for All Academy is located in a state in the Midwest considered a pioneer in the charter school movement. As one of the "first generation" of states to develop charter schools, this state is viewed by some having "strong" charter school legislation (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000). However, that distinction may refer to the ease with which potential charter school operators in this state may obtain charter school status.

In contrast, this state has also been described as having a fairly "weak" state-level accountability system (Griffin and Wohlstetter, 2001) in that it provides somewhat limited direction to its charter schools when those schools are in the process of setting up their own accountability plans. Each charter school in this state is expected to develop on its own an accountability plan with which to demonstrate the achievement of its goals as a charter school. Each operating charter school is, therefore, responsible for identifying its own measurable outcomes and the assessment methods to be used when documenting its progress in achieving the goals of its charter contract. In exchange for what some might perceive of as flexibility, each charter school is then held accountable by the state's regulatory agency for achieving those outcomes within a three-year period of time.

### *The Academy's Educational Program*

Now in its second year of operation as a charter school, Success for All Academy had for several previous years been an alternative school site for its sponsoring school district. Now as a charter school, it is attempting to develop itself into a two-year transitional program for high-risk youth in grades 9-12. Affiliated with a health and counseling center for at-risk adolescents, the charter school is viewed by its staff as an educational alternative for high school students who have not been successful in the traditional comprehensive high schools in the community and who may also need to

develop more appropriate social behaviors and/or "life skills". The Academy may also be an option for students transitioning in or out of juvenile detention centers and/or chemical dependency programs who need an alternative educational setting while deciding whether or not to return to their home school. Typically, students enrolled in this charter school have extensive histories of school truancy (or may have dropped out of school for a period of time) and have significant difficulties with social adjustment and interpersonal behaviors. In addition, approximately 30% of its students have been previously identified as qualifying for special educational services for behavioral disorders and/or learning disabilities.

Instructionally, this charter school offers what it refers to as an experiential curriculum, relying extensively on field trips and off-campus activities as learning opportunities for its students. It also provides a "functional" academic program, preparing students for the basic skills (e.g. minimal competency) tests required by the state for high school graduation and offering a selected range of courses through which students can earn credit toward high school graduation and can complete the state's required performance assessment packets (an additional state graduation requirement).

## *Daily Life at the Academy*

### *The Daily Schedule*

Students enrolled at the Academy are assigned to one of two community groups, depending on which staff member is their case manager. These groups meet first thing every morning and are used for socializing and for communicating to students the announcements of the day. The next two periods of the school day are academic in nature and include classes such as English, Math, Science, and Social Studies. The school also

has a "men's group" (which all the male students enrolled in the school are to attend) and a "women's group" (for all female students in the school). These groups are led by staff members and are apparently used for discussing gender-related issues. Although the Academy doesn't have a gym, it does have a regularly scheduled physical skills class led by a staff member. In addition, the Academy offers classes such as Conflict Resolution, Health Realization, and a Latino culture class.

Afternoons are more apt to be activity-oriented and might include guest speakers, class movies, art activities, and field trips. So far, students at the Academy have taken field trips to places such as an Institute of Art, the state's Historical Center, a water treatment plant, and an indoor rock climbing facility. In addition, some students leave for work-study responsibilities in the afternoons.

*Student Absenteeism*

Staff members indicate that they never know how many students will show up for their classes until the class starts. Some times all the chairs are full. Other times, only a few are in use. I would learn later on that having a history of poor school attendance is one of the "entrance' criteria for students enrolling in this school.

*Teachers' Roles and Responsibilities*

Like the other teachers at the Academy, Suzanne[1] is expected to teach a wide range of subjects. In addition to teaching English (which is her major), she was also teaching a Health class, a class called "Journey through Latino Culture", and a class called "Health Realization" which Suzanne described as "more of a philosophy class on how your thoughts can make your reality."

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[1] names have been changed

As a staff member of the academy, Suzanne is also expected to carry out multiple roles.

> "Generally speaking, I'm a teacher. And I generally teach three to four different classes a semester. One of those classes is actually in my field. So, I am required to teach outside of my field. In addition to that, we do case management where I have anywhere between ten to fifteen students and just kind of help manage their lives. And then we also do quite a bit of team collaboration as far as program development and curriculum development. And then I do some administrative stuff as well – paperwork stuff, tracking… and then also establishing relationships with parents. So there's a lot going on."

*Students in the Program*

Suzanne invited me to observe her English class. I entered the room where her class was to take place and sat in a chair in what I thought was the back of the room. Students soon began to shuffle into the room and then collapse into the chairs at the tables. Students didn't appear to have assigned seats. Some students sat together. Other students seemed to seek out places to be alone. For the most part, they seemed kind of subdued – not much talking. Initially, thirteen students entered the room (e.g. it was about 9:15 A.M. or a few minutes after) - five females and eight males. Later in the period, an additional male and female would arrive. I think each of the late arrivers brought "late passes" with them as they entered the room.

I noticed that several of the students kept their jackets and/or parkas on while in the classroom even though there were lockers lining the hallway outside of the room.

Since Suzanne didn't say anything to the students about taking their jackets off, I'm assuming that the school must allow "jackets on" in the classroom. One of the female students brought a purse with her into the room. In addition, several students had cans of pop and/or bags of chips with them as they entered the classroom and ate their chips throughout the period. One female student had something in a paper bag - like a bagel – that she took bites from during part of the period.

I found myself noticing these things, I think, because the school at which I used to teach (a special setting for severely E/BD secondary students) had rules that didn't allow jackets, hats, purses, food, etc. in the classroom. So, to see those previously "forbidden" things in this classroom caught my eye. As expected, the physical appearance of some students was eye-catching. Some students had nose rings, one male student had tattoos visible on his arm, and one female student had her hair dyed pink.

As I sat in my chair, I could overhear some students talking among themselves at their tables. I noticed one male student displaying his middle finger to another student (when Suzanne wasn't watching). The finger gesture must have been done in jest as the other student seemed to laugh it off. Occasionally, I could hear students using terms such as "f - - -" – especially at a table at the opposite end of the room from where I was seated. When Suzanne heard language such as that, she would say something like "Watch that language" or "My ears are burning" in kind of a joking way. Ironically, students seemed to cease using those terms when she made a comment about it. In general, most students seemed tired or very lethargic.

## *Academic Instruction at the Academy*

### *A Well-Prepared Instructor*

Before students entered the classroom, Suzanne had written the following questions on one of the blackboards: 1) Why do young people use/abuse drugs? 2) What can adults do about it? Earlier in the week, Suzanne's students had written a draft of an essay that was to be a response to one of the questions on the board. As an added incentive for her students, Suzanne had informed her students that she was planning to enter the final versions of their essays in the local newspaper's writing contest. Therefore, during today's class, Suzanne was going to have the students work independently on a series of worksheets while she held individual conferences out in the hallway and conferred with each student about their respective essays – giving them feedback on their first drafts and preparing them for their next draft.

Suzanne had also prepared the following materials ahead of time and had laid them out on the table near where I was sitting:

1. A pile of folders and notebooks. "For students who would need them," Suzanne indicated. I assumed she meant those students who maybe didn't bring their own notebooks to class.
2. Graded assignments (possibly from a previous day).
3. Scrap paper. Suzanne indicated that students were going to write a "warm-up" writing assignment later in the period.
4. A four-page set of handouts. These were the series of worksheets that students were going to work on independently while Suzanne conducts individual conferences with students in the hall.

*Suzanne's English Lesson*

Students were now seated in the chairs around the four tables. Suzanne walked to the "front" of the room – near where I was seated. She began her class by introducing me to the students as a visitor in their class that morning. The students did not seem to react to that announcement at all. In fact, they didn't even seem to look at me. I wonder if this is an indicator of indifference on their part? Or is their lack of reaction just on the surface? Is it just not cool to react to a visitor?

Suzanne handed out notebooks and folders to students who hadn't brought anything to class – these are apparently the students "who needed them". The graded papers were also handed back to students. Next, Suzanne reviewed with students her plans for that period and for the next day. Students would be working independently (Suzanne stressed that several times) on the four handouts stapled together while she conferenced with each of them individually in the hallway. She stressed the self-directedness of the assignment and her expectation that students would work in a self-directed way on their own while she conferenced in the hall. Suzanne also reviewed with students the newspaper assignment that would be the focus of their conferencing. A few of the students asked her if they had actually written a draft. Yes, they had, Suzanne responded. Those students still seemed confused – as if they couldn't remember doing the first draft.

Suzanne then assigned students the warm-up writing assignment. She asked them, "Have you ever been judged wrongly by an adult because of your age - such as when at a mall or like when on the museum trip yesterday?" (Apparently, the school had taken a field trip to a museum the previous day). "Or if you can't think of a specific incident,"

continued Suzanne, "then respond in general to the question: Do adults judge young people? If so, why?"

Some students began to mildly tease Suzanne at this point since she had repeated the directions to the warm-up writing assignment multiple times by now. It seemed to be good-natured joking and Suzanne seemed to accept that joking as O.K. Suzanne then called out into the hallway the first student with whom she was going to begin conferencing. The other students gradually (and on their own, for the most part) began writing a response to the warm-up question. As they finished their responses, they handed them to Suzanne (as she came and went from the room between subsequent conferences with students in the hall).

Students gradually began working on their four-page assignment. About this time, I heard Suzanne say to a student (on one of her trips back into the classroom): "You need to finish this (the warm-up assignment) by using periods rather than 'and – and – and' all the way through (the written response)". I noticed that Suzanne then gave the warm-up writing assignment back to that student (presumably to redo).

The four-page assignment dealt with drug use. Each page contained several paragraphs of text (e.g. four or five) that students were to read. Each page also included one or more photographs illustrating the content of the text. One page contained information on a graph along with three or four paragraphs of text. Another page had some paragraphs of text along with a few short-answer questions that students were to answer with a written response. The last page contained some paragraphs of text and an essay-type question. Suzanne (when preparing these materials ahead of time) had taken a black marker and written explicit instructions and prompts on each page indicating what

parts of the pages were to be filled out by the students (e.g." DO" – written in black marker on some pages, apparently indicating "do these questions"). On the last page – instructing students to answer the essay question by writing their response on the back of the page - was the black marker directive: "Now answer on back".

Suzanne's English class ended at 10:15 A.M. and students were directed to hand in their folders and clean up their tables. Students followed the directions in kind of a sluggish way and then shuffled out of the room – apparently for their break. I was to find out later that students were allowed to go outside between class periods and smoke.

*Instructional Goals*

Suzanne mentioned later that her English lesson had two purposes. First, to get her students to complete a task and, secondly, to get them to think about a topic of great relevance to them personally.

> "...to feel comfortable talking about a really hot topic for these kids. I mean, it is drug use. So that they can actually feel comfortable enough talking about drug use and then writing an essay about it as well. Because, some of them, it's a very personal issue."

I was surprised, since she was teaching an English class, that none of her goals focused on written composition. However I was to learn later on that the Academy encourages its staff to develop assignments around issues relevant to students such as drug use.

*Academic and Behavioral Expectations*

As I reflected back on Suzanne's class, I noticed that the students behaved fairly well while in the classroom with her. Students, for example, seemed familiar with Suzanne's classroom routines and expectations and seemed to comply with her requests

(at least in today's class). Students followed her directions fairly well and ceased using inappropriate language when asked. They began their work when prompted and handed in their folders at the end of the period when directed and without getting out of control (in today's class, at least). Students also came into the room and sat down without being told. I am assuming that Suzanne has had to teach and enforce those expectations consistently since the beginning of the school year.

*Academic Curriculum at the Academy*

Suzanne indicated that there is no one textbook or teacher's manual that she uses when planning her lessons or when planning for her courses. Instead, she is apparently given a lot of freedom to use her own judgment and to be, as she would say, creative. This also appears to be the case when she is teaching courses outside of her major.

> "There are books for ideas. I don't have one book that I go by. Nothing is mapped out for me. It's more like I come up with the objectives for this course. And then how can I reach those? So then, I can draw from different sources...there is no one book. We have a lot of different stuff in hard cover. There's a ton of stuff on the Internet...but it's very creative as far as how the lesson plans are written."

Suzanne explained that she gets ideas for the objectives of her courses from the state graduation standards, the state basic skills tests, and from what she perceives to be the needs of her students.

> "... kind of meeting them where their needs are at. So if they're not passing the writing tests, I need to make sure that my English class covers how to write an essay. "

Suzanne seems pleased with the freedom that she has to be creative with the curriculum. I wonder, though, if each teacher at the Academy has as much curricular freedom as Suzanne, then how does one go about articulating the school's curriculum? And if the curriculum cannot be articulated, them how does one go about assessing outcomes from it?

*Course Planning at the Academy*

Although Suzanne knows what she will be teaching during the upcoming term (English, Health, and Health Realization), she does not yet know what she will be teaching later in the school year. "We're still planning that, Suzanne explained. "For sure, English." Apparently, the staff makes their decision as to what courses to offer based on a number of factors such as the requirements of the state graduation standards, the background of their current teaching staff, and the types of courses for which their students need credits. According to Suzanne, the decisions will be made:

> "...based on the graduation standards plus the team plus what the students' need. We haven't offered American History for a while so that might be something that we'd have to offer... Students need to have so many credits in English. So we have to make sure that we provide that. And then like the American History, there's supposed to be two credits in that, so if we look at our students and they're low on the American History and we haven't offered it for a while, that might be something that we'd have to offer."

After listening to Suzanne, I get the impression that the staff at the Academy has been given a lot of freedom with which to plan its curriculum. I am also getting the impression

that this school is still in its infancy in terms of articulating its curriculum. I wonder why the Academy seems to still be searching for a curriculum since by now they are starting their third year of existence as a charter school.

## Findings

### *Charter School Autonomy and Assessment Decision Making*

#### *Selecting Realistic and Measurable Student Outcomes*

As mentioned earlier, Success for All Academy is located in a state where charter schools are expected on their own to select outcomes for which they will be accountable. To some, this freedom may be viewed as an asset. However, for others it may be a stumbling block.

*Charter contract.* Success for All Academy's charter contract sets forth an ambitious agenda. It stipulates, first of all, that 80% of the Academy's students will demonstrate improvement in: 1) school attendance, 2) accumulation of credits toward graduation, and 3) academic gains on standardized tests. Given that the Academy is a high school, the above expectations appear to be very appropriate goals for which to be held accountable. Although the expectations above could be potentially challenging ones in which to demonstrate student improvement (considering the histories of the students enrolled in this charter school) they still appear to be outcomes on which measurable data could be collected in a fairly reasonable manner.

However, the fourth area of the Academy's contract presents a far more complicated situation. It stipulates that 80% of students will demonstrate improvement in the following twelve "broad outcome goals": 1) gaining effective communication skills, 2) gaining life skills and social skills, 3) developing a sense of interconnectedness of self

and world community, 4) developing goal setting, achievement and employment skills, 5) valuing and contributing to a multicultural society, 6) becoming a productive/responsible citizen, 7) gaining science and mathematics skills, 8) developing the ability to access information, 9) acquiring critical thinking skills, 10) demonstrating self-expression through healthy physical, creative and leisure activities, 11) gaining increased self awareness, self esteem and self respect, and 12) gaining increased resiliency attributes.

*Ambitious goals.* While the above twelve broad outcome goals certainly represent important areas of growth for students, they also seem to present fundamental problems for the Academy. First, the outcome goals appear to be an extremely broad and lengthy set of expectations. It's questionable if the twelve goals could be realistically accomplished in any high school, much less in a two-year transition program. In addition, trying to operationalize and collect measurable data on each of the goals would appear to be a daunting – if not impossible – task also. Finally, if Success for All Academy plans to assess its students on each of the above broad outcome goals, then one would assume that it also plans to incorporate into its curriculum opportunities for students to learn the skills and capacities listed in each goal. That, in and of itself, would appear to be a monumental task for a small developing charter school.

Ironically, Success for All Academy is not alone in setting ambitious goals for itself as a charter school. Griffin and Wohlstetter (2001) reported that many of the charter schools in their study (also from "first generation" charter school states) included in their charter applications outcomes that were also difficult to define and measure.

*Selecting a Measure for Assessing Student Outcomes*

Selecting an assessment instrument and an appropriate method of measurement is again something that charter schools in this state are expected to do on their own. Therefore, having some basic understanding of assessment issues might help some charter schools ask key questions about potential strengths and limitations of measurement products – such as how generalizable the instrument is to other settings and how readily the instrument can be implemented into a school setting. In addition, having some basic knowledge of appropriate assessment practices may also help some charter schools use instruments in intended ways and in ways that will enhance (rather than detract from) the degree of validity and reliability of the data collected. In a sense, becoming a wise consumer of assessment products may be of value for some charter schools, such as Success for All Academy.

Faced with the decision of identifying a measure with which to monitor student progress on the broad outcome goals of their charter contract, the leadership of Success for All Academy decided to adopt the AUEN (Assessing Unique Educational Needs), a standards-driven assessment system developed by the American Institutes for Research and Disability Research Systems, Inc. (1996). The leadership of the Academy felt that the performance standards of the AUEN (which focused on major life goals of adulthood) best reflected its own broad outcome goals and would therefore be an appropriate instrument for collecting performance data on students.

*Strengths and limitations of a measure.* In contrast to the somewhat loosely defined goals in the Academy's contract, the AUEN had clearly stated performance standards that addressed nine major life goals of adulthood such as interpersonal

effectiveness, work habits, and selected cognitive processes. In addition, the AUEN included a system for rating students' performance according to specific performance requirements for each standard.

The AUEN was originally developed as an alternative assessment system for students in special education settings. Several districts in selected states throughout the U.S. currently use various versions of the AUEN for that purpose. However, the Success for All Academy was the first school to decide to use the AUEN with at-risk students and the first charter school to attempt to use it as a measure of school accountability. While some research existed on the use of the AUEN as an alternative assessment with special education populations, no research had yet been conducted on the use of the AUEN with at-risk students or on the use of the AUEN as a measure of charter school accountability.

*Feasibility.* The version of the AUEN adopted by the Academy included additional methods for collecting observational data on student performance. To a certain extent, this version of the AUEN was a type of "proof-of-concept" prototype in that the developers of the AUEN were attempting to develop methods with which school personnel could collect observational data that would have high levels of technical adequacy and which theoretically could be used to enhance the quality of the data from the rating system. Although several years of effort had gone into identifying appropriate performance standards for the AUEN and time had been devoted to designing these additional data collection methods, little information had been gathered yet on the feasibility of implementing these more complex methods into actual school settings. That is, no information existed on the practicality of having school personnel learn to use the

suggested observational procedures included in this version of the AUEN and to incorporate those procedures into the daily activities of an educational program.

*Missing component.* While all versions of the AUEN included performance standards (and the version adopted by the Academy also included suggested methods for collecting observational data), none of the AUEN versions included a curriculum for teaching to students the interpersonal skills, work habits, and cognitive processes addressed in the standards. Instead, the developers of the AUEN assumed that those schools adopting their materials would already have in place a successfully operating curriculum through which the performance standards could be achieved.

*Asking the right questions.* Although the standards of the AUEN were well defined and seemed to be congruent with several of the Academy's broad outcome goals, there were other features of this measurement system that the Academy could have viewed with caution. The version of the AUEN adopted by the Academy, for example, included untried and complex methods for collecting observational data. Not only was the feasibility of teaching school personnel to learn to use and implement those methods yet unknown but the question of whether those more complex procedures would actually enhance the quality of student ratings was also yet to be answered. More importantly, the standards and data collection methods of the AUEN were intended for use in schools with established curricula already in place and functioning well. Yet the Academy's staff was still struggling to define their courses and to create content for the courses they currently offered.

It is unknown how well the limitations of the AUEN were explained to and understood by the leadership of the Academy. In retrospect, it also seems somewhat

unsettling that an assessment system with unproven procedures would be suggested for use at all. However, it's possible that the Academy leadership, when left on their own to make a decision, were unaware of the ramifications of these limitations or were too overwhelmed with other responsibilities and the perceived pressure to produce accountability data that they overlooked the AUEN's potential shortcomings and proceeded ahead anyway.

As it would turn out, the observational methods of this version of the AUEN were indeed overwhelming for the staff of the Academy to learn to use and to implement – at least in the manner intended by its developers. In addition, without any consistent curriculum in place at the Academy during this time, it was difficult to know to what to attribute any improvement in student performance – once data had been collected. So, although the Academy's staff went through the motions of using some of the AUEN materials to gather data on their students and included that data in their required annual reports and sponsorship review, the value of the data was definitely questionable.

*Autonomy and Charter School Management*

Although the Academy had been a charter school for two years, those early years had not been without problems. The freedom of the charter school to hire its own staff members and to manage its daily responsibilities as a school became almost unbearable at times. Possibly this is another area where external support would have been helpful – especially for a small school such as Success for All Academy. It appears that the Academy could have benefited from support in making management decisions that would have created a more stable working environment for its staff members and support in

making curricular decisions that would have resulted in a more stable learning environment for its students.

*Personnel Issues*

According to staff, this charter school lacked stable leadership during its beginning years. The Academy had two different directors during its first two years and was without a permanent director at the time the AUEN was adopted. During that time of changing leadership, the charter school was also chronically understaffed – with staff positions unfilled or filled multiple times throughout each year as a constant stream of staff members were hired and then quit. Staff reported that they had three different social workers come and go during one semester alone. The unfilled positions left the teachers who remained without adequate support in the classroom. The constant change in personnel made it virtually impossible to develop any continuity in the school's educational program.

*Job Stress and Confusion*

.In general, staff reported that those early years were characterized by stress, instability, disorganization, and serious student behavior problems. In addition, staff indicated that their workloads during those first two years were unbearable. As one teacher described it, "Last year I think I was teaching nine courses per semester, " she explained. "... That was crazy." Not only were they assigned too many classes to teach, they weren't given enough time to adequately plan and prepare for their assigned classes. The Academy was also operating on a year-round basis during that time. In order to get in vacation time, staff had to take days off when school was in session – leaving the school short-staffed during their absence.

Staff indicated that the Academy's curriculum underwent repeated changes during its beginning years. According to the staff, these continual cycles of change were also extremely stressful and resulted in a continuous flow of new expectations that they were expected to carry out.

> "[It] seemed more like day-to-day survival... like we were just trying to get through the day... just keeping things together day by day by day... and ... there wasn't a lot of planning for the future....We'd been understaffed and we needed another teacher. The teachers are teaching outside of their subjects in multiple courses...."

It was not surprising that they reported feeling totally overwhelmed when introduced to the AUEN, which was for them yet one more new program to try to understand and assimilate. As one teacher described it:

> "It was kind of aggravating because I don't think the school was prepared to take on another really complex goal. It seemed there was too much going on at once. And this was a new system and it was very complex. And in order for it to work it has to be done properly. So, at first, it was kind of just aggravating because I don't think we were ready."

At the same time that the Academy was introducing its staff to the AUEN, it was also trying to implement a new computer-based instructional program. On top of everything else, the Academy had mistakenly enrolled several students with seriously aggressive behaviors during that time – the types of serious behaviors that they as a school were not prepared to deal with. One student, for example, brought a weapon to school and, in another incident, a fairly serious fight broke out between one of the

Academy's students and someone from outside the school. Those events were quite traumatizing for both students and staff. According to one staff member:

> "[There were] too many things up in the air. And it was a transition with the new director. And there were new students that were kind of shuffled in here quite quickly. And there were a lot of repercussions - behavioral problems – that happened during that period."

In retrospect, it appears that the Academy would have benefited from persons in leadership positions who were more knowledgeable about managing the daily operations of a school and had a more realistic understanding of the nature of teaching and the type of support that teachers need in order to do well in the classroom with their students. Hearing of the early experiences of the Academy also raises questions about the notion of accountability. Should the Academy's staff have had to live through the extreme experiences that they did during those early years? Should someone have been accountable for monitoring the Academy's working and learning conditions during that time? Is accountability relevant only in discussions of student outcomes?

## *Uncertain Expectations of Accountability*

### *Preparing for Contract Review*

According to the Academy's charter contract, one of the grounds for terminating its contract is "failure to meet requirements for pupil performance." Therefore, part of the Academy's motivation in deciding to adopt a measure (e.g. the AUEN), was its assumption that it needed to be reporting to the state and to their sponsoring agency information on their students' progress. Since the Academy had heard nothing from the state or from their sponsoring agency, they felt obligated to continue to adhere to the

expectations of their contract and assume that, in order to be eligible for the renewal of their contract, they needed to have student performance data to show to their sponsoring agency. The fact that their curriculum was not yet developed (thereby making any collected performance data difficult to interpret) seemed to not be an important matter at this point. It was as if they were willing to collect data so that they would have "something" to show to their sponsor and the state's regulatory agency even if that data was of questionable value. Understandably, doing whatever it took to maintain their charter contract was important to them even if it meant doing something that didn't make sense in the long run.

As it turned out, neither the state nor their sponsoring agency held them accountable for providing data in those areas of the curriculum that were still under development. Unfortunately, though, neither agency communicated that change in expectation to the Academy ahead of time. Therefore, without a clear understanding of the expectations that others had of them, Academy ended up devoting a lot of unnecessary staff time and effort to collecting unnecessary data that was of questionable value. Given all the other tasks facing them during that period of time, their time could have been much better spent on activities such as curriculum development than on collecting questionable data.

*Adhering to Expectations Whatever the Cost*

During the time that the staff of the Academy was intently trying to use the AUEN materials to collect student data (in an attempt to adhere to the expectations they assumed others had of them), they were also deluged with a series of other dilemmas such as attempting to establish a stable work force, developing a more realistic work load

for each staff member, and creating a more well-defined curriculum for students. In attempting to accomplish the task of collecting data while also addressing the needs of their overworked teaching staff, the Academy simplified the assessment procedures of the AUEN to make it better fit their time constraints.

Specifically, they decided to assign the assessment responsibilities to their support staff who had less hectic daily schedules instead of having their teachers complete the AUEN ratings. Unfortunately, the support staff also had the least amount of training in the use of the newly introduced assessment system and tended to have the least amount of consistent contact with students. While staff seemed aware of the limitations of assigning assessment responsibilities to their support personnel, they also saw it as a necessary solution to their dilemma of over-worked staff members. As one of the teachers explained it:

> "... the teachers don't have any time just within the daily schedule. Our prep time is very minimum. And in order to have good days with good behavior the lesson has to be very good and very structured. And that takes time. And that takes a clear head. So, the very little prep time that we had - for us to do the ratings as well – our classes would fall apart."

While the above decision created methodological problems for them and called into question again the adequacy of their data, it did help them deal with their immediate needs. In addition, staff members seemed to view that decision as a logical and welcome solution.

The irony of this situation is that the collected data, regardless of its quality, wasn't necessary after all given the change in expectations of the state and the

Academy's sponsoring agency. However, without that knowledge ahead of time, the staff devoted considerable time and effort into finding a solution to a problem that ultimately didn't exist.

## Conclusion

In theory, requiring charter schools to administer assessments for purposes of documenting accountability is a worthy goal. However, the usefulness and appropriateness of such efforts are contingent upon knowledgeable decision-making. Operators of charter schools need adequate knowledge with which to make decisions about their assessment activities. Policy-makers and charter school regulators need an adequate understanding of the conditions under which charter schools will function most successfully. As calls for educational accountability increase, so too will the need for professionally responsible ways of implementing assessment activities and providing critical forms of support to developing charter schools. In addition, it will be increasingly important to re-examine carefully the notion of charter school autonomy so that the freedom to be creative and innovative does not collide with the need to be responsible and accountable.

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